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AUTHOR Saxe, Richard W.
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ABSTRACT

Research assesses the attitudinal factors that characterize outstanding first-year elementary and secondary school teachers as nominated by their superintendents and judged for the Student Loan Marketing Association (Sallie Mae) by a panel of experts selected by the American Association of School Administrators. Sallie Mae nomination forms generated the data. Frequencies were tabulated per response (N=63). The findings revealed that the attitudes of those nominated could be considered "routine" teacher behaviors. The conclusion, then, is that behind each outstanding teacher is a wonderful ordinary teacher. (JAM)

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BEHIND EACH OUTSTANDING TEACHER....

An Analysis of the Teacher Tribute Award Nominations for the Student Loan Marketing Association 1988-89

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Prepared by
Richard W. Saxe
Distinguished Professor
The University of Toledo

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BEHIND EACH OUTSTANDING TEACHER...

Introduction

The Student Loan Marketing Association (Sallie Mae) has sponsored the Teacher Awards Program for five years. This program honors first-year elementary and secondary school teachers nominated by their superintendents and judged for Sallie Mae by a panel of experts selected by the American Association of School Administrators. One hundred award winners each receive a plaque and $1,000. Their schools also receive a certificate

The nomination and selection of the 100 winners is an interesting process, but it is not the subject of this report. A colleague on the most recent panel of judges has addressed this issue elsewhere (Rich Daugherty forthcoming).

This year (1988-89 competition) a new element was added to the Sallie Mae First-Year Teacher Award program. All first-year nominees were invited to nominate the teacher who most influenced their career choice for a Teacher Tribute Award. First-year teachers were not required to nominate teachers for the Tribute Award; it was entirely voluntary and had no effect on their chances of becoming one of the 100 winners. Nevertheless, 63, of the eventual winners did make a nomination for the Teacher Tribute Award. These 63 nominees were then honored with the Teacher Tribute Award.

The Teacher Tribute winners each received a plaque and were publicly recognized in a September issue of Newsweek. According to Sallie Mae, the purpose of the new award was: "to recognize the importance and contribution of the entire teaching profession."

A Context for Teacher Awards

The Sallie Mae First-Year Awards combine two types of awards--the cash bonus and award recognition honor. The Tribute Award, of course, provides only the recognition benefit. These are two of nine types of teacher incentive programs found in public schools in a recent report of the National Center for Education Statistics (1989). The report found that only 38 percent of all public schools offered one or more teacher incentive programs. Even more surprising, the survey revealed that only 5.1 percent of the schools offered the award/recognition incentive. This despite the negligible cost involved! Cash bonus awards were provided at 4.7 percent of the schools. The seven other incentives were: different step on the salary schedule, free retraining, loan forgiveness, released time, shared program with industry, extended contract, and other incentives.

The incentives were intended to accomplish one or more of four purposes:

1. attract to less desired location;
2. retain experienced teachers;
3. recruit teachers for fields; and
4. reward excellence.

Rated most effective was released time while cash bonus was least effective (NCES, 1989).

The Sallie Mae First-Year Program would seemingly fall under both "reward excellence" and "recruit teacher" categories. The Tribute awards might possible contribute to the "retain experienced teachers" category, although that is not its purpose. The list of purposes is not really relevant to the Sallie Mae awards because they are not directly addressing any of the four purposes. Moreover, the Sallie Mae awards do not focus on a given area or district.

The purposes of Sallie Mae awards would fall into three different classifications: for Sallie Mae, for school districts, and for recipients. We can infer that Sallie Mae seeks primarily to increase the status of teaching and to call attention to the existence of the student loan program. School districts would seemingly benefit most from enhanced public relations and improved morale in the teaching force. The recipients, both first year and tribute, will enhance their professional standing, a status benefit, and the First-Year winner will enjoy the material benefit of the $1,000 bonus. Clearly, different criteria would determine the success of the program for each of the three groups. However such evaluations turn out, we can still applaud the awards

program because, like eating oat bran, "it's the right thing to do."

This Study

It seems as though the teacher tribute nominations would add another dimension to our understanding of the lasting effects of teaching. We teachers have all been inspired and awed at one time or another by the famous quotation: "A teacher affects eternity; no one can tell where his influence stops" (Henry Adams). This sentiment is at the same time flattering and intimidating. To affect eternity through generations of students is an awesome responsibility to which few of us would claim we are fully adequate.

The raw data in these nomination forms will address this issue, the influence of the teacher on succeeding generations. Even more to the point, however, we shall be in a position to view teachers in the way Burns prayed for in To a Louse: "O wad some power the giftie gie us/To see oursel's as others see us." Through the comments of the 63 first-year winners, we shall see what practices and characteristics of teachers make enduring impressions on students to the extent that they consider becoming teachers themselves.

It should be noted that our data are not adequate to support any firm conclusions. We can search for trends and make tentative inferences, but that is all. Moreover, we can make no claim that what we discover is related

to effective teaching, just that it is memorable.

Method

The nomination forms were made available by Sallie Mae. The sample form shown in Exhibit 1 was a part of every first-year nomination packet. The information for grade level was summarized for elementary school, junior high or middle school, high school, and other. The affiliation/governance of schools was recorded as public, religious and other private. Data were also assembled for gender of nominator (the first-year winner) and nominee (the tribute winner).

The replies to the four open-ended questions were assigned to categories that arose from the content. Each discrete element from a nomination was entered the first time that it appeared. The response to any question might generate one or several entries. For example the first inspection of question number 2, character attribute, resulted in 32 entries each with frequencies of from one to nineteen. These 32 categories were then collapsed into 14 based on the close meaning of two or more terms. For example the categories of "caring" and "interest in students" were combined. Two persons performed this task separately and then made the final assignment to category by consensus.

EXHIBIT 1

TEACHER TRIBUTE AWARD NOMINATION

by_____
(First Year Nominee's Name)
(To be completed by the First-Year nominee at his or her option)

Who was the teacher?
Name (If you are aware of a subsequent name change due to marriage, etc., please include both last names)

_____
School and grade level at which you were his/her student.

_____
School system of which that school is/was a part.

_____
Complete address of the school or school system.

_____

_____

_____

Most recent home and/or work address and telephone number(s) you know of the *teacher* you are citing. If deceased, so indicate here.

_____

_____

_____
What, in particular, did your nominee do in the classroom that influenced you?

What personal or character attributes did the teacher exhibit that made an impact on you?

What difference did the teacher make in your education and ultimate choice of a career?

What do you do differently in *your* teaching and interaction with students as a result of your model teacher influence?

Results

Gender, grade and type of school

- Nominating first-year teachers were female, 53, and male, 10.
- Nominees (tribute teachers) were female, 38, and male, 25.
- Level of school of the nominee (tribute teacher) was:
    - elementary 25
    - middle, junior high 3
    - high school 31
    - other 4
- Affiliation/governance of schools was: public 50, religious 10, other private 2, and other 1.

What, in particular, did your nominee do in the classroom that influenced you?

TABLE 1
Responses of 63 Outstanding First Year Teachers to: What, in Particular, Did Your Nominee Do in the Classroom that Influenced you?

Category	N
The Model Teacher Cared for Students as Individuals	33
The M.T. Instilled Self Confidence	32
The M.T. Made Learning Rewarding and Fun	21
The M.T. Used Effective Teaching Methods	20
The M.T. Was Enthusiastic	19
The M.T. Maintained Discipline/Control, Created Good Climate	9
The M.T. Made Learning Relevant to Life	4
The M.T. Understood Content	3
The M.T. Talked to Students	2
The M.T. Had a Sense of Humor	2
The M.T. Was a Role Model	1
	146

The responses to this question are summarized in Table 1. The two most frequently cited elements out of eleven identified are both psychological--attitudinal reactions of the students to actions of the tribute teachers. Four of the top five elements, accounting for 125 out of 146 entries, were all attitudinal rather than method or content oriented. Only one of these five dealt with instructional behavior of the tribute teachers. Twenty respondents reported that "the model teacher used effective teaching

methods."

What personal or character attributes did the teacher exhibit that made an impact on you?

TABLE 2
Responses of 63 Outstanding First Year Teachers to: What Personal or Character Attributes Did the Teacher Exhibit that Made an Impact on You?

Category	N
The M.T. Showed Interest in and Caring for Students	63
The M.T. Was Enthusiastic, Energetic, Positive	19
The M.T. Used Effective Teaching Methods	11
The M.T. Maintained Positive Discipline	10
The M.T. Was Professional	9
The M.T. Was Fair	8
The M.T. Was Honest and Sincere	5
The M.T. Was Approachable	5
The M.T. Showed a Love of Learning	4
The M.T.Had a Sense of Humor	4
The M.T. Understood Subject Content	1
The M.T. Was a Male Model in Elementary School	1
The M.T. Prepared Students to Deal with Rejection (ART)	1
	141

Although the four open-ended probes were intended to deal with different aspects of teaching, we find essentially the same pattern of responses. The top two categories are attitudinal and far out number all others. The thirteen categories deal with attitude, emotional climate (interest

and caring), general, scout-law-type characteristics (honest, fair), teaching methods, and, as in Table 1, a mention of knowledge of content. The first of several entries concerning role model appears in the response of one student who valued the tribute teacher because he was a male role model in elementary school.

What difference did the teacher make in your education and ultimate choice of a career?

TABLE 3
Responses of 63 Outstanding First Year Teachers to:
What Difference Did the Teacher Make in Your Education and Ultimate Choice of a Career?

Category	N
The M.T. Served as a Role Model	47
The M.T. Helped Me to Believe in Myself	14
The M.T. Inspired Me to Learn More	8
The M.T.Prepared Me for College	8
	77

The twenty-two categories derived in the first analysis of this question were subsequently reduced to the four found in Table 3. This time the respondents found it easier to focus on the intent of the question and only one item fell in the enhanced self-concept group which predominated in the previous two questions.

What do you do differently in your teaching and interaction with students as a result of your model teacher influence?

TABLE 4
Responses of 63 Outstanding First Year Teachers to: What Do You Do Differently In Your Teaching and Interaction With Students as a Result of Your Model Teacher Influence?

Category	N
I let Students Know That I Care About Them	29
I Build the Self Esteem of My Students	25
I Use A Variety of Teaching Techniques	16
I Try to Create Love for Learning	15
I Use a Sense of humor	6
I Provide a Professional Atmosphere	3
I Try to be a Role Model	2
	96

The first analysis generated over thirty categories in response to this leading question. One wonders if there would have been so much divergence and so many responses if the question were reworded: "Do you do anything differently as a result of the influence of your model teacher?"

The final seven categories in Table 4 are the logical results of the responses to the previous questions. The tribute teachers have been perceived as role models whose caring behavior most impressed the nominees. So, it follows that, if the nominees are to do something in response to their early impressions to emulate their role models, it will be to

"let students know that I care about them" and "build the self esteem of my students."

Summary, Discussion, Implications

Gender, grade, governance

Nothing can be said about the gender, grade-level and governance items. It would be possible to develop rationales supporting predictions in these categories but there are no strong trends in the data. We cannot attempt to suggest a profile of the tribute winner.

The open-ended questions

We can, however, present a representative description of how the first-year teachers perceived their tribute nominees. Exhibits 2 and 3 are actual forms that may serve as a prototype or composite of the perceived tribute winners. One is for an elementary teacher, the other high school. We could have selected dozens of forms with this pattern.

EXHIBIT 2 (Elementary School)

TEACHER TRIBUTE AWARD NOMINATION

by a female first-year teacher
(First Year Nominee's Name)
(To be completed by the First-Year nominee at his or her option)

Who was the teacher?
Name (If you are aware of a subsequent name change due to marriage, etc., please include both last names)

a female teacher in 1962-63 school year
School and grade level at which you were his/her student.

an elementary school
School system of which that school is/was a part.

a large urban district in the east
Complete address of the school or school system.

Most recent home and/or work address and telephone number(s) you know of the *teacher* you are citing. If deceased, so indicate here.

What, in particular, did your nominee do in the classroom that influenced you?

She made me feel special and that school could be a place of success for me if I worked hard.

What personal or character attributes did the teacher exhibit that made an impact on you?

She was warm and caring. I feel that she thought each one of her students was important. She was a professional in dress and practice but never distant.

What difference did the teacher make in your education and ultimate choice of a career?

She made learning fun. I lived for school and on many occasions thought of being a teacher just like (name).

What do you do differently in *your* teaching and interaction with students as a result of your model teacher influence?

In my teaching, I try to make learning fun and as relevant to the students' lives as I can. As a result of my former first-grade teacher, I hold my students hands when I can. I wipe their noses. I smile, I cry and I care. I treat them as whole persons, not just students.

EXHIBIT 3 (High School)

TEACHER TRIBUTE AWARD NOMINATION

by female first-year teacher
(First Year Nominee's Name)
(To be completed by the First-Year nominee at his or her option)

Who was the teacher?
Name (If you are aware of a subsequent name change due to marriage, etc., please include both last names)

male teacher
School and grade level at which you were his/her student.

high school
School system of which that school is/was a part.

An urban center in the midwest
Complete address of the school or school system.

Most recent home and/or work address and telephone number(s) you know of the *teacher* you are citing. If deceased, so indicate here.

What, in particular, did your nominee do in the classroom that influenced you?

(name) strongly believed that every student could succeed and therefore we believed we could also. He was always excited and enthusiastic about his classes. He motivated us to really work at improving ourselves through our education.

What personal or character attributes did the teacher exhibit that made an impact on you?

His empathy and compassion for students.

What difference did the teacher make in your education and ultimate choice of a career?

(name) assisted me in writing and giving my salutatory address thus showing me the power of the spoken word. My dream is to be an inspiration to my students the way he was to me.

What do you do differently in *your* teaching and interaction with students as a result of your model teacher influence?

I try to remain empathetic towards my students. I strive to keep lines of communication open; my students and I are teammates exploring the field of physics together. In preparing lesson plans I ask myself: "Why would I want to have this knowledge? What would I use this for?" In this way my students enjoy the classes because they are being taught something they want to know.

The same pattern emerges from the four tables summarizing responses to the open-ended questions. In Table 1 (what did the teacher do) we are told that the tribute teachers "cared for students as individuals." The same response was reported in Table 2 (personal, character attributes of the teacher) "showed interest in and caring for students." Table 3 shows that "the model teacher served as a role model" and, not surprisingly, Table 4 reports that first year teachers have reacted to these caring role models by emulating their characteristics and behavior: "I let students know that I care about them." So--our prototype of a tribute teacher is of a role-model who cares about students as individuals and shows this caring in his/her teaching behavior. Perhaps the real "tribute" in the language of this program is in the attempt of the first year students to act in accordance with their perception of the role model teacher--to care for another generation of students.

Discussion

The 63 nomination forms are a rich source of information about the subjective impact of a teacher on a student over time. When the specific behaviors of the tribute teachers are reviewed something surprising yet reassuring is revealed. There is nothing at all unusual described in the nomination forms, nothing that all of us as teachers would not describe as routine teacher behavior. After all, we were all "taught" to care for students as individuals, not only in arranging learning materials but also in our role as quasi counselors operating en loco parentis. Weren't we?

This impression of the "ordinariness" of tribute teachers should not be surprising. Whenever mature (old?) observers of American education read accounts of star teachers they must feel some of this. Three typical examples of this phenomenon are on the writer's desk today. An issue of the new publication, Teacher, features descriptions of outstanding teachers who have influenced American celebrities. Some of the described teaching behavior of the stars is not only routine, it would be considered less than good practice (Schapiro, 1989). The second illustration is a clipping, "Flexibility, dedication secrets of top teacher" that describes the work of Illinois' teacher of the year (Belsie, 1989). Another article, "A Lesson From Teacher," profiles the experiences of ten outstanding teachers in the Detroit Public Schools (Davis, 1989).

Probably the most complete documentation of the phenomenon we are describing "wonderful ordinariness" is found in Tracy Kidder's remarkable saga of a full-year spent observing Chris Zajac, a fifth-grade Massachusetts teacher, in her classroom. The details of the excellent teaching described in these sources are, as someone aptly put it,"deja vu all over again."

These reactions are not meant to denigrate the star teachers described in the articles and in Kidder's book. On the contrary, our intent is to emphasize the rich potential of teaching. We can all be heroes! It does not require super-human talents to be perceived as sincere, caring mentors to our students, Apparently, teachers, ordinary mortals, may earn a place in

the memories of their students by ordinary good practice. Or, has ordinary good practice become extraordinary?

Implications

If the implications of these data are correct (and readers are reminded that we cannot support conclusions, only suggest trends), teacher educators need to continue their attention to the affect of teaching as well as to the content and method. Perhaps a more careful selection, retention procedure of future teachers is appropriate.

Principals and administrators may wish to include evidence of the affect of teaching in their supervisory conferences. Teachers may need to be helped to find and apply more systematic but informal ways of monitoring their classroom climate.

Much more could be said, but we have already gone beyond the limits of our data. Perhaps, we have read too much into what was essentially merely a basis for honoring well-remembered teachers. Our data show ample reason for honoring them. If we aspire to learn more about what makes these particular teachers stand out, we may need to revise the existing procedures or gather other sorts of data.

We conclude this report by completing the phrase suggested by the title Sallie Mae gave to the tribute program: "Behind Each Outstanding Teacher...." Sallie Mae should not be distressed when our conclusion to the phrase differs from the one clearly implied. Our data convince us that behind each outstanding teacher is a wonderful ordinary teacher.

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